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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: GOVERNMENT LESSONS LEARNED FROM THREE  
MONTHS OF PROTEST

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (SBU) Embassy Prologue: "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning." Sir Winston Churchill, Speech in November 1942 who just might well have been describing Georgian internal politics in July 2009. End Prologue.

12. (C) Summary: This is the first of three cables analyzing the more than three months of protests by non-parliamentary opposition against President Saakashvili. Now that the protests have largely dissipated we attempt to draw a number of general observations and in this case focus on the tactics and strategy of the GoG. The GoG appears to have learned many lessons from the November 7, 2007 rallies. In using a strategy of patience and non-intervention, the government appears to have significantly strengthened its political leverage vis-a-vis the non-parliamentary opposition which has seen its stature diminished (septel). Significantly, the GoG allowed the protests to largely fizzle out on their own, which served the purpose of discrediting most of the non-parliamentary opposition; discrediting street politics in general as a way to force regime change; and saved the GoG from political blowback both internationally and domestically from using force to disband the rallies. Having analyzed its mistakes of the past, the GoG was determined not to repeat them and in doing so has largely neutralized the non-parliamentary opposition. End Summary.

13. (C) Comment: While in many ways this phase of street protests has come to its conclusion, the larger questions that led to the non-parliamentary opposition gathering in the street remain. Trust between the government and the non-parliamentary opposition is nearly nonexistent, making meaningful dialogue difficult to accomplish. The public has shown they no longer support street protests, especially ones that block city streets and disrupt everyday life. However large portions of the population hunger to see the democratic reforms promised by Saakashvili and his government. If the government wants to further neutralize the non-parliamentary opposition's street tactics, they must build the democratic infrastructure that will create a forum for real democratic debates -- a debate which would reveal street politics for what they are -- a struggle for personal power. In order to diffuse the next round of street protests, be it in August, November or April, the government needs to find a way to bring the moderate and influential voices of the non-parliamentary opposition into the process. If the non-parliamentary opposition wants to gain influence, opposition leaders will have to show that they are taking the government's approaches seriously, something they have not done to date. They will also have to come to the table, or risk losing a voice in electoral and constitutional changes. End comment.

We Have a Plan - A Coordinated Message

14. (C) Before the protests, GoG officials from Speaker

Bakradze to parliamentary backbenchers were well aware of both the GoG's plan and corresponding message: no matter how many people are involved in protests, neither President Saakashvili nor other senior officials would resign. The same group consistently stressed that they were open to dialogue on a number of issues. The GoG followed through both publicly and privately on dialogue promises, holding both publicly and privately on dialogue promises, holding numerous meetings with non-parliamentary opposition leaders. The GoG never budged from its original message and was able to present a consistent, coherent case throughout the protests. Whether the GoG's message drove public opinion, mirrored it, or both, recent IRI polling showed that the public overwhelmingly did not support Saakashvili's resignation or early elections, presidential or parliamentary. The non-parliamentary opposition's calls for Saakashvili's resignation, and their refusal to discuss any substantive issues beyond this, made it easy for the government to win the public relations battle. The GoG had framed the debate in such a way that even non-parliamentary opposition supporters were questioning the wisdom of constant calls for Saakashvili's resignation when it was obvious to all it would not take place.

#### We Still Need and Want You to Play Ball - GoG's Strategy

15. (C) Various GoG figures from Speaker Bakradze on down detailed the GoG's assessment of the political situation before the protests began. The general feeling was that the non-parliamentary opposition had substantial support (particularly in central Tbilisi) but nowhere near the support they believed they had or needed to have to pose a real threat to Saakashvili. The GoG felt it had substantial

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political leverage and the clear upper hand in negotiating position; however, it was well aware of the corrosive effect of carrying out politics in the street as the political norm rather than the exception. Thus, the GoG seemed committed to bringing non-parliamentary opposition leaders to the table by offering meaningful concessions on concrete issues beyond what a simple zero sum bargaining calculus would dictate. Even before the protests, the GoG tried to engage the non-parliamentary opposition but was resigned to the fact that only after protests started would serious discussions take place.

16. (C) Once the initial protests faded, the GoG put out feelers through Speaker Bakradze, Minister of Corrections and Legal Assistance Dima Shashkin (former IRI Chief of Party), MP Givi Targamadze and others to initiate quiet talks about compromise. (Embassy Note: The Ambassador facilitated a number of these meetings and held them discretely at his residence. End Note.) The GoG indicated early on that it would pursue dialogue but would not wait forever and would not negotiate Saakashvili's resignation. Even after the non-parliamentary opposition mocked and belittled Speaker Bakradze during their first open meeting, Bakradze and others continued to pursue dialogue as they believed it was in the GoG's interest. Privately, a number of GoG officials expressed their frustration at various non-parliamentary opposition leaders lack of action, lack of political sense, and lack of perspective concerning their relative bargaining position and corresponding demands. The GoG was well aware that the voice of the people was not calling for Saakashvili's resignation; but rather, further democratic reforms. While the GoG saw engagement in its best interests and preferable to engage the non-parliamentary opposition and include them in the process, they stated from the beginning that they would move ahead on their own at some point.

#### We'll Take Our Facts - You Take Your Instincts

17. (C) The GoG used pollsters and focus groups throughout the protests to gauge public opinion. Time and time again, the GoG message corresponded to broader public sentiments.

The GoG was aware that the public almost universally did not view the political conflict as a struggle for democratic values, but as a power struggle. The GoG's political message was focused on what the Georgian public was saying it wanted rather than subjective opinion to craft its message. The government's message honed in on what they thought were real issues that matter to the public including, the economy, its economic plans for future development, its economic record and other practical issues. The GoG defended its democratic track record and also repeatedly stressed the lack of an alternative plan among the non-parliamentary opposition.

18. (C) Most observers and Georgians quickly assessed that non-parliamentary opposition leaders were imperfect vehicles for democratic criticism of the GoG, and that the democratic message only had limited appeal, mainly in certain areas of Tbilisi among political and cultural elites. The non-parliamentary opposition refused to believe their message was the problem and seemed to have given little thought as to why Saakashvili maintained a relatively strong popularity (50-65 percent favorability ratings in most polls) in spite of the August war with Russia and economic downturn. Over the course of his presidency, Saakashvili delivered on the course of his presidency, Saakashvili delivered on tangible issues and continued to do so in the regions and among pensioners shoring up his support base. Also widely underestimated was the GoG's reform of the police and virtual elimination of petty corruption which to the average Georgian held much more sway than arguments about the relative balance of executive power or the election code.

I'll Just Sit Back and Watch You Implode

19. (C) The GoG benefited from the fact that non-parliamentary opposition leaders remained fractured and dysfunctional which ultimately caused the protests to fizzle. Having learned from November 2007, the GoG was determined not to provide a spark or pretext for wider unrest. The GoG showed restraint even after the May 6 incident at a police station and largely let the protesters do what they wanted. This strategy was reluctantly praised by a number of non-parliamentary opposition leaders who clearly had not expected such a response. The tactic left the non-parliamentary opposition confused and forced them to take unpopular measures like blocking streets and creating "corridors of shame" which only further diminished their appeal. By the time the GoG made a mistake in a police crackdown on demonstrators on June 15, the public barely raised an eyebrow. The non-parliamentary opposition's inability to form a coherent strategy, find a leader, speak

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with one voice, as well as its disorganization showed the public what a non-parliamentary opposition presidency would look like if they came to power. The GoG's wait and see approach served to marginalize the non-parliamentary opposition politically. This strategy also helped de-legitimize street protests as an effective way to achieve regime change.

## Conclusions

10. (C) The GoG developed a significant strategy to respond to the protests. There was only one obvious breakdown which resulted in disproportional use of force by police and seizing of journalists' cameras on June 15. The GoG appears to have accomplished its aims of discrediting both certain members of the non-parliamentary opposition and the use of protests as an effective means to carry out political dialogue. Nonetheless, the GoG will face further protests - likely in the fall after the anniversary of last year's August war (August 7) and the two-year anniversary of November 7 loom in the calendar. Despite its short-term political victory, it will need to show progress on democratic reforms to a skeptical public to insulate itself from further street actions. The GoG still appears willing

and open to incorporating non-parliamentary opposition into political processes and must remain magnanimous about its political victory, otherwise it runs the risk of simply perpetuating the cycle.

TEFFT